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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a critical, collaborative, qualitative approach to action research that involved university and school system personnel. The paper discusses researchers' engagement with narratives and conversations during their study, examining how they gained critically reconstructive insights into the teachers' world of curriculum decision making through narrative and conversation. The paper also discusses the researchers' ongoing struggle over what counts as an authentic voice within research projects, addressing the relationship of researchers with teachers and the positioning of researchers within the study. The study emphasized curriculum leadership valuing the centrality of teachers as curriculum leaders. Researchers invited elementary and secondary teachers to write narratives about curriculum leadership, engage in followup conversations, collaborate on analyzing the narratives, and elicit themes contributing to a model of curriculum leadership. Narrative brought to the research the value of each participant's experiences with curriculum leadership. Working with narratives enabled researchers to value the ways that teachers positioned themselves individually in curriculum leadership initiatives, and it allowed teachers to voice their uniqueness. The researchers suggest that this orientation to narrative promotes participatory research, which offers a view of knowledge arising through curriculum leadership struggles required to transform a situation, contributing to the professional growth of teachers and researchers. The researchers advocate this type of research, noting criteria to keep it authentic. (Contains 34 references.) (Author/SM)

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Establishing and sustaining a critical and reconstructive 'network of engagement' in and about curriculum leadership through the use of narrative and conversation.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a form of qualitative inquiry which has enhanced the current conceptual and practical understandings of authentic collaborative research. This form of inquiry has been used to investigate the phenomenon of curriculum leadership (Elliott, Brooker, Macpherson, Mcinman & Thurlow, 1996). The qualitative component of the investigation used narratives and conversations to elicit lifeworld perspectives (Habermas, 1987) of teachers in relation to curriculum decision-making and leadership in a system context which often appears to devalue their significant role in leading learning.

The purpose of this paper is to recount our engagement with narratives and conversations in the research investigation and to show how we have gained critically reconstructive insights into the teachers' world of curriculum decision-making through narrative and conversational windows. It also recounts our ongoing struggle about what counts as an authentic 'voice/voices' within research projects of this type. In doing so we address the positioning and repositioning of our team members as researchers and our relationship with teachers in the study, as we move through differing phases of data collection and analysis within the study and reconstitute our relationships with our teaching colleagues. We propose a way of addressing the question of whose voice is speaking.

This paper reports research from a project funded by the Australian Research Council and Education Queensland in 1996 and 1997. The members of the research team included Tania Aspland, Lynn Burnett, Bob Elliott, Ian Macpherson, Adrian McInman, and Christine Proudford, School of Professional Studies and Ross Brooker, School of Human Movement Studies, Queensland University of Technology; and Joan Jenkins, Leonie Shaw, Greg Thurlow, Christine Woods, Laurie Wheldon and Del Colvin, Education Queensland. The ideas developed in this paper were developed with the knowledge of the research team mentioned above. The paper forms the basis for a research grant application for a much larger research investigation in the latter part of 1998 and during 1999. This investigation will use an action research approach and employ a mixed methodology as a means of developing further and authenticating a living educational theory about creating space for the voices of significant stakeholders in curriculum leadership.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a qualitative approach to action research which is both critical and collaborative, involving university and school system personnel. This approach has been used as a means of understanding the lifeworld perspectives of teachers in relation to curriculum decision-making and leadership in a systems context which often appears to devalue their significant role in leading learning. The paper documents some of the lessons we have learned about the use of both narrative and conversation from engaging in critical collaborative action research. It also outlines the theorising which the research has facilitated in the area of curriculum leadership for effective learning and teaching.

One of the dilemmas in the work presented here is that we want to acknowledge that our research methodology is as important as our substantive findings. It is not simply that we are investigating the phenomenon of curriculum leadership that is significant, but that we are exploring the most authentic way of investigation as partners. We are, as a research community of teachers and academics, always struggling with the tensions of juxtaposing our findings with our positioning as researchers, while at the same time, articulating a space for teachers' voices - a phenomenon central to the project. What follows is an attempt to illustrate just how the connections and tensions come alive through the research. The following format reflects the juxtapositioning of these two agendas. By using a different font for each agenda, we have tried to capture this interplay and highlight the impact of one agenda upon the other. We invite you to join us in a conversation across the two agendas.

TELLING THE STORIES ACROSS THE TWO AGENDAS

The substantive focus of the research (in regular print)

The substantive research area is that of curriculum leadership-a research venture that values the centrality of teachers as curriculum leaders. The orientation to curriculum leadership that has emerged challenges the reductionist view that administrators are *the* curriculum leaders (Bailey,1990) and questions an organisational and managerial perspective on curriculum activity (Owens,1987). Rather, we are arguing a more critical and socially constructed orientation that positions curriculum leadership as central to the broader social, political and cultural relations of schools, curriculum, teaching and learning.

Such an orientation has led us to an emerging model of curriculum decision making which identifies the ways in which teachers position themselves differently in curriculum leadership; and highlights the interrelationship between teachers personal qualities (such as being a risk taker, feeling trusted) and aspects of the sociocultural, sociohistorical and sociopolitical aspects of the school (such as the ways teachers engage in curriculum decision making) and the social dynamics of the school personnel within its infra structural constructs.

This model highlights the dialogical relationship among these types of constructs and the ways in which teachers (and others) respond to opportunities to engage in curriculum leadership at particular historical moments. (See Brooker, Aspland, Macpherson, Jenkins, Woods, Elliott, Proudford, 1996:59; Elliott, Brooker, Macpherson, McInman, Thurlow, 1996).

The methodological focus of the research (in italics)

Following on from our work with teachers in 1993 and 1994, in 1995, we invited teachers in four schools (two primary and two secondary) to: participate in the writing of narrative; engage in follow-up dialogical conversations; to collaborate in analysing the narratives; and elicit themes which will contribute to our tentative model of curriculum leadership for effective learning and teaching. Teachers enthusiastically participated in each of these phases and found it a worthwhile experience, both professionally and personally. During 1996 and 1997 we have continued this work with another group of schools using a slightly modified focus through the use of case studies of curriculum leadership. We selected another group of teachers in 1996; and adopted a model of 'intervention' and 'authentication' studies at selected school sites in 1997. This was our attempt to validate and extend the work to date. From the antecedent research studies and in 1993, 1994 and 1995, our research emphasis was working 'with' teachers not 'on' teachers. Teachers were researching with us on matters of mutual professional interest. Both the intervention studies and the authentication studies had teachers participating with us in collecting, analysing and reporting data developing as we went; and developing educational theory of working collaboratively with teachers. (Feldman, 1993; Levin, 1993; Lieberman, 1992; Miller, 1992; Knight, Wiseman & Smith, 1992; Beck & Black, 1991; Campbell, 1988; Kyle & McCutcheon, 1984).

It is worth noting that within this view of curriculum leadership:

- The voices of all people especially teachers should be heard in teaching and learning conversations, curriculum decision-making and leadership within school contexts;

- Teachers position themselves within curriculum leadership relations in ways in which they seize or ignore opportunities to lead.

- The ways in which teachers position themselves is shaped by the images of curriculum held by people in the school; the organisational infrastructure constructs within the school; the social and cultural relations that people construct within the politics of curriculum decision making; factors external to the school; and the development of particular events at specific historical moments.

- The personal qualities of each teacher are significant in mediating these constructs and the seizing of leadership opportunities; and

- The ways in which teachers position themselves in curriculum leadership at specific sites is unique and responsive to the mediated relations implicit in the politics of curriculum decision-making and curriculum leadership.

These qualities and constructs have emerged through our ongoing narratives and dialogical conversations with teachers throughout 1996 and 1997. The framing of the dialogue within the research community was significantly shaped by the "narrative" literature, considered both a mode of inquiry as well as a research method. It has been argued that narrative (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) is the most appropriate form of research set in educational institutions where the research participants are given the opportunity to access their own thinking about their experiences in a particular setting at any point in time. These well-recognised authors put the case that individuals can recount their experiences through "stories" that bring to the fore "the images, rituals, habits, cycles, routines and rhythms" that constitute their daily practices. It is well recognised as both a form of "inquiry in narrative" and "narrative inquiry" (Connelly and Connelly,1990:2) and it was this opportunity to give teachers a voice in our research, and more importantly, to reclaim their voice at the level of analysis and reporting , that was, and remains central to our research initiatives.

The narrative has evolved over the years in the social sciences, and has been characterised in differing ways that are responsive to its research purposes (Connelly and Clandinin,1990; Johnston,1992; Carter 1993). The early work of Scholes (1982) has been instructive in reconceptualising the narrative genre in the latest phase of our study, revealing the varying modes of inquiry possible through the narrative.

Of greatest significance for us has been the "story as fiction", a form of narrative that lends itself to identifying modes of curriculum leadership inherent in teachers' practices of effective teaching and learning. Based on Gough's work (1994), we have begun trialing an innovative way of interpreting narrative as "fiction". This may prove more useful in research inquiries of this

nature, for it offers to the research community greater opportunity to generate links between existing practices or "present reality" and "past or future possibilities" that have emerged or are likely to emerge in teachers' work (Gough, 1994:47). These opportunities are more enriching than the simple interpretation of narrative which traditionally has been arrived at through processes of reflection and reflexivity, processes that sometimes fall short of the proactive thinking that is central to informative research. Moreover, the specific development of the narrative advocated by Gough (1994) proposes the use of the narrative as a "diffracting lens" - a phenomenon that is useful in the reconstruction of teachers' curriculum thinking.

Narrative brought to this research context the value of each subject's experiencing of curriculum leadership and highlights the importance in this study of the self-constituted being as an integral part of curriculum leadership - a phenomenon to date that has not been recognised in the essentialist work that dominates this field. The eliciting of stories through the narrative recognises the teaching self within the phenomenon of curriculum leadership; subjectivities that are no longer characterised as a unitary cohesive cohort but "selves and worlds operat(ing) in many modalities" functioning in a "multiverse of experiences" (McHale, 1992: 247) common to leadership of this type. Working with narratives in this way enabled us to value the ways in which teachers positioned themselves individually in curriculum leadership initiatives quite differently from others. It also invites teachers to voice what it is that is unique about them or their contexts that shape curriculum leadership in a particular form at any historical moment. Narratives of this type are diffractive (Gough, 1994) as well as reflective as they capture the social, cultural and political realities in and from which they were generated. In this sense, they offer each subject an opportunity to better understand why they are positioned within a particular curriculum leadership space and how it is socially, culturally and politically constituted and constituting.

It is argued that this orientation to the narrative promotes participatory research, at the heart of which is found a view of knowledge arising through curriculum leadership struggles required to transform a situation, struggles that in turn, contribute to the professional growth of the participants - both as teachers and researchers.

POINTS OF REFLECTION CONCERNING METHODOLOGY AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION: WHOSE VOICE/S IS/ ARE SPEAKING?

The methods implicit in the narrative framework of the study included the following:

- written narratives detailing a significant episode of curriculum leadership;
- narratives about narratives.
- dialogical conversations involving members of the research team and groups of teachers;

These three methods were specifically designed not only to capture teachers' stories through narratives and ongoing reflection, but to generate proactive thinking about the 'possible selves' (Elliott et al, 1997) that emerge with the telling, analysis and theorising of the stories and how teachers position themselves (or imagine themselves) within curriculum leadership.

The primary record: Writing a narrative.

Each teacher in the study was invited to write stories about curriculum leadership. The narratives articulated significant events of curriculum leadership that portrayed how each teacher positioned themselves within curriculum leadership in a particular context. It was intended to initiate the study in this way, rather than with a series of focus questions. We wanted the catalyst for discussion to emerge from the daily events of the teachers' world, rather than from predetermined questions projected from the research team.

Meaning making: Stimulated recall using the unstructured interview.

The initial narratives formed the basis of stimulus questions for a number of interview sessions with teachers, facilitating the retrospective sharing of episodes of curriculum leadership and further, the disclosure of covert thinking about curriculum leadership phenomena - data that is otherwise inaccessible. Such introspection brought to the study, not only the telling of stories, but also an examination of the complex phenomena of curriculum leadership - examining why I do things the way I do? - and lastly, generating rich possibilities for consideration in thinking about - where to from here? It was this critique of practice and the centrality of the teachers voice to this critique that was integral to our methodology. Carspecken suggests that meaning reconstruction of this nature should always begin with the tacit and holistic understandings of everyday life (Carspecken, 1996:95). Rather than the researcher in isolation noting, through some means of objective coding, what appeared to be significant within the stories, we tried to unpack underlying significant meanings of teachers' stories through a collaborative process that we later refer to as dialogical conversations (Herrman, 1982). However in the first instance our unstructured interviews about the narratives offered us an opportunity, not only to hold onto the teacher's voice, but to collaboratively select significant chunks of the narrative for explicit, preliminary analysis or "meaning reconstruction" (Carspecken, 1996). Through the unstructured interviews in the first instance, we collaboratively identified possible meanings as well as possible selves within the stories as well as noting key concepts that were central to our research.

It is at this point that teachers' narratives, and more specifically teachers' voices, have traditionally been rendered silent by more popular reductionist forms of analysis used by researchers in their quest for the "truth". This study did not want to replicate orientations to exploring leadership that have traditionally portrayed the researcher as "authoritative and distanced...an invisible, neutral and observing" participant (Jones,1989 in Gough,1994:56) who simply reinscribed a power dynamic to which we are theoretically opposed (Jones, 1992:18). We were trying to reconceptualise and resituate the research theories, methodologies and practices of the narrative in the everyday curriculum world of the participants and the underlying social reality (Roman,1992) of that world, giving greater access to the dominant factors that shape and have shaped curriculum leadership for each participant. This reconceptualisation promoted a more realistic commitment to advocacy oriented critical research that fostered a shared understanding of the everyday world of curriculum leadership for both the teacher and the researcher.

Meaning reconstruction: Narratives about narratives

Interviews of this nature were further enriched by a process of reporting back our initial interpretations that took the form of *narratives about the narratives or our stories about your*

stories. After listening to and writing about the interviews, the research team returned to the school community with our narratives, for what has traditionally been considered a validation check or member checking procedures. This was an invaluable learning experience for us in "playing with the narrative" and invaluable in pursuing the authenticy of our work . However it was also a useful process for the teachers participating in the study. As we mirrored their narratives in our narratives and our shared understanding of their stories with them, they were able to engage in further critique of their thinking and their practices. Sure, it enhanced the authenticity of our reporting, but of equal importance, it created for teachers a snapshot of how they were positioned in curriculum leadership as individuals. In responding to our narratives (our preliminary analysis, teachers were able to speak further about their practices, they continued to critique and interpret their own practice and at the same time, critiqued our interpretations of their practice.

Our narratives about narratives were attempts to create a collaborative portrayal of a meaning field (Carspecken, 1996). A meaning field in this sense, is an attempt to specify possibilities implicit in the meanings that are constructed through interactions, such as narratives and/or interviews. This research process captured the uncertainties of meaning making as the researcher attempted to "raise meaning fields from the tacit to the discursive" and in doing so risked misinterpretation, misappropriated meaning possibilities due to his/her own interests, and/or overlooked possibilities that were of great significance to those in the field. Typically meaning reconstructions or data analysis at this level does not accurately articulate the actual possibilities anticipated by the subject. The narratives about narratives were our attempts to refine a shared articulation of the meaning field and meaning possibilities within the domain of curriculum leadership.

Ongoing reconstructive analysis: Dialogical conversations

The interactions that emerged as we reacted to the narratives about narratives can best be characterised as "dialogical conversations" (Herrman, 1982). This type of dialogue complements the narrative genre in a number of ways that is significant for collaborative research of this nature. It is

> (I) continually self critical and open to question with reference to each participants theoretical imposition of ideology with those of others;
>
> (ii) useful in engaging in an ongoing monitoring of the purposes and processes of the study as a collective rather than a team engaging in research acts upon another; and
>
> (iii)in having an ongoing commitment to representing the subjectivities of each participant in ways that generate and examine the many complex facets of the emerging meanings and possibilities.

In locating oneself in a large study of this nature, each researcher needed to be cognisant of the importance of allowing his or her prior theoretical and political commitments to be informed and transformed by the lived experiences of the person with whom he or she conversed. This of course did not mean that we disregarded our own theorising. Rather, we encouraged the juxtapositioned of our own experiences with those of the research subjects (Roman,1992:583). The interplay of these experiences was most vividly conveyed through the dialogical conversations that occurred throughout the project.

As we mirrored their narratives and our shared understanding of their stories in an ongoing way with the teachers, they were able to engage in further critique of their thinking and their practices, creating a snapshot of how they are uniquely positioned in curriculum leadership as individuals. Further, it invited teachers to share their voices in ways that were not only personally insightful, but in ways that were collectively powerful in reshaping or affirming existing conceptions of curriculum leadership. This also generated a shared understanding of the phenomena under study, moving the level of meaning construction well beyond the tacit worlds captured in the initial narratives. The complex sets of knowledge, values and assumptions underpinning the initial significant episodes that were reported, became more clearly delineated through the critique and reconstructive meaning making that took place through our dialogical conversations about the narratives. The multidimensionality of the collaboratively reconstructed meaning field invited all participants to more accurately share the meaning and analysis of reported curriculum leadership episodes. At the same time it enabled future possibilities to remain central to the research agenda, at no time placing closure or reductionist boundaries around our collaborative efforts to understand both our own and other's practice.

To move away from narratives that reproduce or simply portray the status quo was essential for us if we were, as we had hoped, to capture the dynamics implicit in the positioning of each teacher within curriculum leadership and how this positioning was shaped by factors peculiar to each individual in differing sites.

This type of methodology that advocates the confluence of the narrative, narratives about the narratives and dialogical conversations offers to both teachers and researchers opportunities, not only to think back over significant episodes that were worthy of sharing with others but also, presents opportunities to look forward - making connections between their existing practices and future possibilities. What was of interest to the researching partners in exploring such narratives were the possibilities "to establish how individuals give coherence to their (curriculum) lives when they write or talk...the sources of this coherence, the narratives that lie behind them, (and) the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered (Denzin,1989:62). But what was of greater significance for this study was the centrality of teachers voices not only at the level of story telling but throughout the study as we analysed and theorised the positioning and possibilities of teachers as curriculum leaders in specific sites.

Ongoing concerns

While we feel a sense of achievement at the level of data analysis and meaning reconstruction within the study, we continue to struggle with other research matters such as the following:

- ethical concerns as to the releasing of data;
- moral and political problems as to the generation the findings beyond one school site or across cases;
- value conflicts and epistemological differences within the research team;
- issues related to the place of power and authority that accompany the research team in changing research times;

- issues of participation, and sampling of teachers; and

- contradictions and role dilemmas when teachers come to suspect 'a hidden agenda' behind the researchers' self-proclaimed promise to a teacher-defined and teacher-directed approach to professional development.

The emerging shape of the study acknowledged the concepts and lived experiences of power, as central to the research constructs of the enquiry due to the very nature of the critical discourse being pursued. We had to carefully position ourselves as researchers so as not to overpower the teachers participating in the study. Yet, we did not want to be placed outside the research as 'voyeur'. We had anticipated that our role as researchers would be central to the dialogic conversations of the teachers, and in this sense, as members of a 'research community' that valued a parity of esteem amongst its partners. We believed that for far too long leadership studies of an interpretative nature have overlooked what was central to its constructs. By immersing ourselves fully into the research community we hope to better understand and transform the nature of curriculum leadership as research partners, working with teachers and not on them.

By engaging in research of this nature we (teachers and researchers) hoped to provide possibilities for the emancipation of each participant through self revelation. More significantly it offered to us as a research community, opportunities to engage in self articulation and self determination as we immersed ourselves in the research process. This implies a responsibility to construct a research discourse that encourages each participant to reposition his or her subjectivity/ies in order to better facilitate some form of active agency as the basis of ongoing research dialogue. Again we engaged in stories and dialogical conversations that kept our research processes moving.

It becomes obvious that research of the type reported here contributes to the reshaping of traditional research to address successfully the interests of teachers in ways that are designed to be transformative and ultimately empowering for the participants.

KEY QUESTIONS

A number of questions are presently forming the basis of our discussions as we plan to move forward:

- How can narratives be used more effectively with teachers in pursuing collaborative research partnerships?

- What is the value of the written narrative and/or the spoken narrative in teachers' lives?

- What is the best research ethos in which to promote collegial conversations with and between teachers and researchers?

- How can we effectively generate and value processes of critique and reconstruct within the dialogue of school communities?

- Is there a sustainable way of engaging teachers in this type of dialogue that offers subjects

new ways of seeing how they are positioned and ways of moving forward?

- How do we address the differing epistemological ways of seeing the research within our research team in ways that promote debate but ensure cohesion?

INSIGHTS THAT WE HAVE GAINED

This type of research offers to our educational community new ways of engaging in critical collaborative research that:

- Values critical analysis and a reconstructive orientation to research that is responsive and dynamic;

- Offers support to teachers as researchers through partnerships that value the centrality of teachers stories as a data base that can be instrumental in stimulating and maintaining change;

- Offers teachers opportunities to articulate how they are positioned within curriculum leadership with a view to repositioning and transforming such positioning through ongoing critical analysis;

- Strengthens partnerships through collaborative university-school research communities;

- Provides opportunities for critical self renewing cycles of curriculum leadership and professional growth through the dialogical conversations of a research community;

- Generates narratives that are both reflective and proactive in stimulating and maintaining curriculum leadership initiatives;

- Enables new roles as researchers for both teachers and university personnel within the participative ethos of a research community;

- Challenges traditional forms of interpretative research that overlook the emancipatory and transformative processes of critical research in the domain of curriculum leadership.

In completing this type of research we argue that it is not only teachers voices that are central to the various phases of this study. We have realised and advocate that our collective voice speaks on behalf of and for teachers *and* researchers. The generation of tales, the meaning making from the tales both personally and collectively and the critique and reconstruction that accompanies our ongoing theorising is multifaceted and representative of how we are positioned in and are reconstituting our situated and collective selves within curriculum leadership thorough a dynamic, polyphonic network of engagement.

CONCLUSION

As a result of these experiences, our research team is keen to advocate the 'appropriateness' of this type of research for new times in changing educational contexts. In pursuing such a challenge, we are developing a set of criteria that will help to keep us honest and authentic in our research endeavours and to frame ongoing discussion within both the particular research community associated with the research reported in this paper and the broader research community represented at this conference. The criteria are:

- sensitivity

How sensitive am I/are we/is our context to the complexities and dynamics of people and place, and what ethically based responses are appropriate for creating opportunities for people to participate in reflections and reconstructions of thinking on practice?

- critique

How critical am I/are we/is our context in creating and sustaining opportunities for people to participate in reflections and reconstructions of thinking and practice?

How clear am I/are we/is our context in terms of the frameworks which frame my critique?

- practicality

How practical am I/are we/is our context in terms of critiquing and reconstructing - is there always a balance or praxis between being critical and being practical?

- applicability

How applicable is the praxis to making things better for myself, others and the context, and how can the momentum towards empowerment and transformation be sustained?

- authenticity/credibility

How authentic and credible am I/are we/ in our context in doing what I/we say I/we do in my/our praxis approach (that is, how sensitive, critical, practical and applicable am I/we in using action research to reflect upon and reconstruct my/our critical, social practice?)

- conviviality/communicability

How convivial am I/we/is our context really in working with others, and how do I/we navigate the place and positioning of people within the place in ways that are ethically and epistemologically defensible, practically possible and applicable, and clearly shared and believable?

Appropriateness, then, is not argued so much on positivist grounds in terms of the reliability and validity of outcomes. Rather, it is argued more on the grounds of the appropriateness of process to the epistemological roots and the professional purposes of investigating, critiquing and reconstructing our multiple positions and dimensions as they relate to our professional thinking, work and work contexts. In these terms, outcomes are more generative than generalisable. Generalisability may be the long term outcome as the iterative (if not repetitive) and elaborate nature of our professional (and personal) lives build theory, which, in the end, may well be more believable (and applicable, and empowering and transforming at the levels of self, others and the context) than a tidy test (such as a reliability coefficient) which gives a quick answer (or a self congratulatory pat on the back) in the short term. Notions of trustworthiness, if denied in ways that focus on people and processes, may well provide a much more solid basis for arguing the validity of products and outcomes than a statistical formula. Think about it, and continue the conversations and reconstructions with us.

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